



[Johnson] Drowning Jackson

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When you look at it abstractly, Two Lakes developer John McGowan makes an easy villain: an old, wealthy white landowner intent on taking public lands for private profit with the help of wrangling politicians. But when you meet this man, it's tough to place him in such a diabolical role.

Give him a minute, and he'll amiably relay his tale of traveling from the spillway down the Pearl searching for the answers to Jackson flooding. He casts himself as the "simple engineer" who realizes that with a little tree removal here and a bit of dredging there, you can essentially create a ditch that will shoot the water right through, and while you're at it, why not create a beautiful lake with upscale development?

The problem is that McGowan is hawking old ideas in a complex future. The Two Lakes plan, regardless of how many forms it takes or how many politically situated voices push it, faces too many obstacles to be a reliable solution to the very real problem that spawned this pipe dream. Jackson faces an impending inundation of floodwaters whether we are ready for it or not.

McGowan's flood-control solution is a classic tale of man besting nature. For most of the past century, the answer to flooding was to straighten rivers or strategically dam them up. There was no problem human ingenuity couldn't dredge or concrete its way out of.

It was only after we developed a deeper understanding of our environment and began to see the long-term destruction imposed by such projects that we began to reverse our strategy. Dead zones formed, erosion escalated, and rivers continued their persistent urges to twist and turn out of our control.

Suddenly, wetland restoration became the hot, new thing. Cities began to purchase properties from landholders in flood zones and reduced liability by transforming them into public recreation developments. The cultural meme became a more sensible notion: man cannot control nature, only work with it.

Many of the obstacles Two Lakes faces are factors that were not on our radar when we built the Ross Barnett Reservoir. Silting from these proposed man-made islands is now a measurable and known effect. Relocating landfills are now, thankfully, a costly and technologically demanding affair. We have since recognized and begun to protect animal species unique to our Jackson Pearl River Basin. Engineers can project the effects to

coastal fisheries. Data has convinced many of our southern neighbors that they will be deprived of needed water flow during dry times and receive torrents of water and greater flooding when wet. These are not just obstacles; they have powerful interest groups behind them that will certainly sue to protect their properties and livelihoods if Jackson adopts the Two Lakes plan.

The absence of any budget for the certain litigation facing this project is troubling, indeed. Jackson could easily find itself with an approved Two Lakes plan stalled in courts for decades. Worse yet, we could see a developer destroy our wetlands and then suffer from coffers too depleted to finish the job.

A handful of people behind Two Lakes pull the strings, insistent to push until their dreams of high-end lakeside development are realized. The majority of Jackson wants flood control as soon as possible and would be more than happy to have a low-cost levee plan solve the impending crisis. With a comprehensive levee system in place and Two Lakes finally off the table, we might even see politicians move to open up this extravagant green space for public use. With the continued development of Richland toward Jackson, people are noticing that the Pearl could be a unique eco-tourist destination similar to Central Park.

Now that is a big dream with a manageable cost.

At the end of the day, Mississippi politicians have spent more than a decade discussing an ever-changing plan in lieu of taking real action to protect Jackson citizens. Politicians and investors are so convinced that they can push their wishes on the people that they have essentially held our city hostage through bureaucratic wrangling. The time has come to stop parading out a new Two Lakes plan every few years and actually implement a solution. It will certainly rub people the wrong way if we have our homes flooded again only to emerge and find the same old faces still trumpeting this tired idea.

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